

How to use the head halter for training and control of undesirable behavior

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Pets tend to oppose or pull against pressure. Dogs that walk or lunge ahead of their owners are therefore more likely to pull even harder if the owner pulls back on the leash. There are three basic ways of pulling on the head halter to achieve most goals. If the dog is walking at your side or slightly behind you with a minimum of slack on the leash, all you have to do is pull forward to get the dog to back up (heel, follow). A pull upward will close the mouth (barking, nipping) while continuing to pull up and forward will back the dog into a sit. With the leash attached to the head halter, you can immediately turn the head to achieve eye contact. A continuous pull rather than a tug or jerk should be used until the desired behavior is achieved. Immediately releasing tension as soon as the pet complies indicates to the dog that it is now responding acceptably. With the second hand, the dog's head can be cradled into position by gently cupping the hand under the jaw.

Training should begin in calm environments with minimal distractions. The dog is given the command and if it responds appropriately, a reward is given. A lure reward or closed hand target can be used to help guide the pet into the correct response. Rewards for training might include something the pet values (food, walk, or play toy) along with praise and stroking. After a few successful responses, the special treat can be phased out and given intermittently, but the praise and stroking should continue. Clicker training would be another option. If the command is given and the desired response cannot be achieved, an immediate pull on the head halter can be used to guide the pet into the desired position and ensure success. The tension is then released and the dog rewarded.

There are five key elements to successful head halter training.

1. Ensure proper fit

Be certain to review the manual or video or have a demonstration on fitting. If the strap around the neck is not high and snug enough and the nose strap adjusted properly, the head halter may either be too tight around the nose or so loose that the dog may pull it over the nose. To ensure that the pet adapts quickly to the head halter, it can be helpful to offer food treats as the dog slips its nose through the nose loop and as the collar is fitted. The dog can then be taken for a walk or played with to keep it distracted while getting used to the head device.

2. Be prepared for immediate action

If the dog does not instantaneously respond to a command, then the owner must immediately ensure success. This means that the head halter should be on, there should be minimal (perhaps 1 to 2 inches) of slack on the leash, and it should be pulled instantaneously to get the desired response. A pull up and forward can get eye contact (for target training, control, and calming), close the mouth, and get the dog to back up, follow, or heel. Continuing to place tension on the leash should get the dog to sit. Using the second hand to guide or support the head can help the dog to respond faster and calm quicker.

3. Motivate

Although the halter gives the owner the physical control to get the desired response, an encouraging voice, holding up a target (e.g., closed hand with food inside), appealing eye contact, and rewards are critical for motivating the pet to respond. Of course the rewards (stroking, clicker, food, toy) are not given until the dog responds appropriately.

4. Release tension as soon as the desired behavior is exhibited

The owner gives the command and pulls quickly to achieve the desired response (sit, heel, quiet) if the pet does not immediately obey. Just as quickly, the owner begins to release as soon as the pet obeys.

5. Repeat or reward

As the owner releases (a very small amount of slack is given), the dog will either respond appropriately (at which point the reward can be given) or will resume the undesirable response (e.g., tries to stand, lunge ahead, bark).

If the latter is the case, the owner should immediately take up the slack and pull to achieve the desired response. The pet is then again released and the sequence repeated as often as necessary until the desired behavior can be maintained without pulling. While it may take numerous repetitions of the pull and release to get the desired response, the total time to achieve success might range from a few seconds to a few minutes. Remember that by releasing only a small amount of slack, it will require only a slight pull to regain control. A hand can be used to help support and guide the pet into position. It is important to understand that the pulling is a prompt to get the desired behavior while a release indicates that the desired behavior has

been achieved. The reward (food, clicker, toy, praise, stroking) is intended to mark and acknowledge the correct response so that future success is ultimately driven by rewards.

Once these steps are accomplished, the owner can proceed to more complex tasks or more difficult environments. For example, the dog can be taught to sit and stay for gradually longer periods of time before the reward is given. The owner can gradually move farther from the dog (still maintaining only an inch or two of slack) to train the dog to stay and not to follow or lunge forward. The dog can be trained to quiet down at the front door. Once the dog will walk by the owner's side, the heel or follow command can be given at times when the dog might lunge forward on a walk or jump up at visitors at the door or bark.